

Moscow Said to Shift To Limited-War View

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Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Nov. 23 — The weight of Soviet military thinking is apparently shifting toward the position that nuclear weapons would not inevitably be used in a future war, qualified sources reported today.

This departure from the opposite view identified with Nikita Khrushchev, that the immediate or early use of nuclear arms had to be expected, was cited as the most meaningful change in Soviet strategy in the year since the former Premier fell.

It is a welcome change to the United States, which made a similar shift itself about five years ago—from

“massive retaliation, with its threat of instant use of nuclear weapons, to “selective response,” offering American commanders the choice of beginning their defense with conventional forces.

Generally it has turned out that Soviet strategists have coped with the strategic problems raised by new military technology in about the same way as Americans, but about five years later. This lag is said to reflect the American missile lead.

Delay Is Favorable

In the American view, any Soviet strategic turn that calls for delay and discretion in use of nuclear weapons is to the good, since the interval allows the chance for developments that might head off nuclear war.

Some West European strategists and, until recently, the bulk of Soviet strategists, have held that only the threat of instant nuclear devastation would stop a foe from launching an attack.

One of the first clues to draw Western attention came last January in a communique of the Warsaw Pact, the Communist “NATO.” It protested West Germany’s supposed

“advanced frontline strategy, which calls for the use of nuclear arms from the very start of any military conflict in Central Europe.”

At the same time Moscow explosively objected to a West German proposal, subsequently shelved, for a belt of atomic land mines along the East German border. Such a belt would imply immediate nuclear war.

In February Gen. S. N. Shtemenko, a leading ground-forces theorist, wrote in the press on the theme that hostilities would not automatically lead to a nuclear exchange.

Maneuver Held

Last month’s maneuvers of the Warsaw Pact in East Germany drew attention for their relatively late “play” of an enemy nuclear attack.

It is thought possible that the nonnuclear example of Vietnam has influenced Soviet thinking on whether convention would escalate into nuclear war.

Men who are competent to discuss these things note that this new development has not been formally codified in Soviet strategy and that wars have a tendency not to be fought by the book.